DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 428 478 EC 307 081

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TITLE The Selection of Peer Models in Early Childhood Special Education Programs: Issue and Procedures.
PUB DATE 1999-02-19
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Environment; *Disabilities; Early Childhood Education; *Evaluation Criteria; *Inclusive Schools; Mainstreaming; Peer Acceptance; *Peer Relationship; *Peer Teaching; *Selection; Special Education

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some considerations and recommendations regarding the selection of children to serve as peer models in early childhood special education classrooms. The problem of having too many potential children to consider and choose from, or not enough children to consider and choose from, is discussed and the importance of establishing procedural guidelines to help both staff and community members know what is involved in the selection of peer models is urged. Criteria include: (1) the number of children being served in an early childhood special education classroom; (2) the types of disabilities exhibited by the children; (3) the ratio of boys to girls; (4) children with the same developmental or chronological age as the child with a disability; (5) the ratio of typically developing children to children with disabilities; and (6) the selection of children who live in the same general area as the children with disabilities to enable friendships and interactions outside of the structured school setting. (CR)

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The Selection of Peer Models in Early Childhood Special Education Programs: Issue and Procedures

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The Selection of Peer Models in Early Childhood Special Education Programs: Issue and Procedures

Abstract

Though considered a "best practice" the inclusion of typically developing children in early childhood special education programs is still an issue many schools are struggling with. This article discusses some considerations and recommendations regarding the selection of children to serve as peer models in early childhood special education classrooms.

The involvement of typically developing children to serve as peer role models in early childhood special education classrooms has long been considered to be a "best practice" in early childhood special education (McDonnell & Hardman, 1988). Including typically developing children in programs serving young children with disabilities can have educational and social benefits for children both with and without disabilities.

Despite the fact that the involvement of peer models is an accepted idea, children who are typically developing may not be a part of early childhood special education (ECSE) programs. This may be due to funding concerns, because there are no clear guidelines for the selection of these children, or because of a lack of availability of typically developing children. This paper

will address a number of questions or issues that need to be considered in identifying and selecting peer models.

Identifying and Selecting Peer Models

There are a number of issues and/or questions that should be addressed when considering the identification and selection of peer models. Some problems may arise because there are too few potential peer model candidates or too many; schools or agencies may not have clear procedures or guidelines to aid in this selection process and staff may have difficulty selecting the most appropriate children. This section will address some suggested procedures for the identification and selection of peer models.

When ECSE staff initiate efforts to identify potential peer models, one of two problems may arise: too many potential children to consider and choose from, or not enough children to consider and choose from. These are opposite concerns but either could be present given where a school is located ie. urban vs. rural, willingness of children and parents to participate, or the success of child find efforts. In either case it is important to have clear guidelines established to address the problem.

Having too many potential peer models to choose from is one problem staff can experience. The larger the number of children and families involved the easier it may be to unintentionally offend a parent or family if their child is not selected. Some parents may feel very strongly that their child be a peer model because they see a value in the program, the child care program may be provided at no or little cost, or it is viewed as some sort of

status symbol. School staff may have a difficult time telling some parents that their child is not going to be a peer model. Under no circumstances should the school set up a waiting list. Though it seems like a sound enough idea, problems can sometimes be encountered because a few parents will call frequently to check on where their child is on the list.

Some ECSE programs have been known to conduct a lottery or essentially "pull names out of a hat" to select peer models. Other schools or districts may conduct screenings, create a list of potential candidates who are children of staff employed at the school, or generate a list of potential peer models from the community at large. Creating a list of potential candidates would be preferable to a random selection. The children chosen for inclusion in an ECSE program should be selected because they match the needs of the program not because their names are drawn out of a hat.

Telling parents that their child has not been selected as a peer model may be difficult for some school staff as some parents may be very adamant about having their child selected. It is extremely important that staff be honest in their discussions with parents and to be sure and explain the reasons why a child was not selected. This process can be made easier if clear guidelines are developed and explained to parents when children are first considered.

The establishment of procedural guidelines would help both staff and community members know what is involved in the selection

of peer models. The guidelines should specify when children are to be selected, the desired characteristics of potential children, and the decision making process involved in the selection of individual children. Such guidelines provide a structure for the selection of children and help ensure that everyone understands the decision making process involved in selecting children.

As part of the selection procedures it may be useful for children who are candidates as peer models undergo a 30-day trial period in the ECSE classroom. This period of time would allow staff to collect enough information on a child's behaviors to make a good decision regarding that child's inclusion in the program. At the end of the 30 day period staff could make decisions on individual children to help ensure that there is a "best-fit".

In addition, the evaluation procedures used should be Play-Based. Play-based assessments procedures would be preferable because we need to have a good indication of a child's behaviors and skills in play situations with other children. Observing children at play with other children can give us a good indication of their ability to seek out other children to play with or how well they share or take turns. It is a natural and unobtrusive way to evaluate children and it can be completed by several staff members at the same time.

One of the most important criteria for the selection of peer models is what represents the "best fit" for the program at the time. The number of children being served in an ECSE program, the types of disabilities exhibited by these children, the ratio of

boys to girls, as well as ages of children are not static, they change over time. One the factors to consider in the selection of peer models is the population of children currently being served and selecting peer models to provide a good balance across age, gender, and ethnicity.

Age of Children

The age of children being considered as peer models is an important variable that needs to be considered. Of particular interest is the issue of choosing children who are similar in either chronological age or developmental age to the children with disabilities. The issue of chronological versus developmental age is an important one because we are trying to enhance interactions among all the children. Children will tend to seek out other children who are similar to them in some way and one of the ways children can be similar is in developmental level.

Children selected as peer models based on chronological age may exhibit skills or behaviors that are above the developmental level of children with disabilities. Yet these may be the children who are best suited to be peer models because they are the ones who can exhibit higher order skills and behaviors for the children with disabilities to imitate. On the other hand, because these children are functioning at a higher developmental level they may not seek out the children with disabilities as playmates.

Another concern in the selection of peer models related to age, is an issue regarding choosing children who might be considered at-risk as opposed to children who do not show any kind of

developmental delay. Some ECSE programs may choose to select children as peer models who do not qualify under eligibility requirements for the ECSE program, but do show some smaller degree of developmental delay. Two reasons for choosing children who may be at-risk would be that a) these children could benefit from the instruction provided in the program, or b) that they more closely match the developmental level of the children with disabilities enrolled in the program. It could also be argued that these children may not have sufficiently developed social or language skills to serve effectively as peer models.

How Many Peer Models?

The question of how many peer models to include in an ECSE program will be dependent on a number of factors including the numbers of students being served who have exceptionalities, numbers of staff available, and regulations governing class sizes in each state. In our experience it is not unusual for there to be 2-4 peer models in each classroom.

It is also important to consider the ratio of typically developing children to children with disabilities. Individual states or school districts can have different guidelines has to what constitutes an integrated, mainstreamed, or inclusive environment for young children. One question that may need to be asked is "What is required to meet state guidelines as a typical preschool setting?" Some states, for example, may require as much as a 50-50 ratio whereas others may view typical preschools as

those that have as few as 30% typically developing children.

What Characteristics Are We Looking For?

It would be easy to say that children selected as peer models should have appropriate language and social skills as well as some specific types of behaviors such as persistence and an accepting attitude. But we need to be careful not to choose children who have levels of development well above that of the children with disabilities. For example, young children identified as gifted may not always fit in to a typical play group because they exhibit behaviors above that of the other children. They may be leaders rather than followers and may prefer to engage in their own activities rather than follow the directions of peer (Kitano, 1985).

In the spirit of normalization, children selected as peer models may best be children who are "neighborhood kids", children who live the in same general area as the children with disabilities. Selecting children from the same neighborhoods can increase the possibility for friendships and interactions outside of the structured school setting, but will be more difficult to do in rural areas.

What Do The Selections Of Peer Models Say To The Community?

It is important that the community have an understanding of the role peer models play in an ECSE program. Certainly one of the reasons for including peer models in ECSE programs is to help the typically developing children learn acceptance of individuals who are different than they are.

Because the early childhood services offered to the typically developing children may be provided at no charge to the family, there may be large number of families who would like to have their children considered for the program. If this is the case, care needs to be taken to ensure that selection procedures are clearly stated so that families or community members are not offended if their child is not selected. Again, the establishment of clear procedural guidelines for the selection of peer models can be helpful in reducing any resentment on the part of family members. When parents need to be informed that their child will not be selected as a peer model it should be done stressing the needs of the ECSE program at the time. Care needs to be taken to ensure that the selection of peer models does not seem elitist.

Summary

The selection of typically developing children to serve as peer role models is an accepted best practice in early childhood special education. The selection of these children should be based on explicit guidelines that have been developed by staff to help ensure that the children selected will match the overall needs of the ECSE program at the time. The number of children, the ages and gender of the children, and where the children live are all important variables that will need to be considered.

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